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ABBÉ GREGOIRE ON NURSING

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SOME philosopher has said that however well we may know the history and outcome of any reform, we cannot fully understand it until we discover its original inspiration. From Mrs. Fenwick's article, "The Evolution of the Trained Nurse," in the *Outlook* for January, 1900, from Dr. Ferguson's papers with the same title in the *JOURNAL* for April, May, and June, 1901, and from the addresses published in the *JOURNAL* during and since the last International Congress of Nurses, even the youngest probationer can have ample information concerning the beginning and growth of nursing; but it was just while the Congress was in session that I found, not, indeed, the "original inspiration," but what is certainly an interesting proof of the need, the faith and the hope which underlay the venture of training women for the care of the sick.

In 1820—sixteen years before Frederica Fliedner opened the school at Kaiserswerth and the very year that Florence Nightingale was born—Abbé Gregoire's pamphlet on nursing was printed. It is noteworthy that this should have come from France, which is now in the rear of civilized countries in the care of the sick. The text of this essay, if extant, is very rare, but in the *Christian Observer* for August, 1820, is the review of its contents, and, believing that this will be interesting to all readers of the *JOURNAL*, I give an exact copy of this article, which was printed in England and America nearly a century ago, while the Fliedners were in their early maturity and sixteen years before they were destined to make the first practical trial of its theories:

"The benevolent ex-bishop of Blois, whose zealous exertions in so many other departments of philanthropy are well known, has recently printed a tract (I am not aware whether it is published) proposing a

plan for instructing attendants on the sick in the discharge of their arduous but often ill-performed duties. Among the evils, he remarks, which afflict humanity, there is one which, though not a malady itself, aggravates every malady and often renders it mortal—the want of due care, or an indiscreet mode of management. The powers of medicine, without good nursing, are proverbially of little avail; and the Abbé justly adds, that ‘even affection and kindness, indispensable as they are, are insufficient without that skill and sagacity which are derived from the habit of attending the couches of affliction.’

“M. Gregoire proceeds to depict, in distressing colors, the case of widowed and bereaved persons, ‘celibataires,’ strangers, and travellers, who, though possessed of fortune, often find that money cannot purchase the attentions which they require. The description which he gives of hired nurses is sufficiently appalling, and I should hope greatly exaggerated—at least, if I may judge from our own country, where, perhaps, we may manage these affairs better than in France; though I suppose no one will deny that amongst *us* also there is ample room for improvement in this useful class of society, to whom we must, most of us, at one time or other, be indebted. In the article of ‘ivrognerie,’ which the Abbé joins with ‘malpropreté, rapacité, and inhumanité,’ I fear we are even worse off than our Gallican neighbors; though, among the modern and better instructed race of nurses, the evil is greatly diminishing. Our hospitals have done much for rearing well-informed attendants on the sick; and thus, as in many other instances, the charity of the rich has, by the providence of God, been turned to their own advantage. I am not, however, aware that a school for nurses forms a regular part of hospital discipline, though it appears well worthy of doing so, and would be an incalculable benefit to the community. I would propose that in every infirmary any respectable female, who wishes to learn ‘the art’ of nursing, should be apprenticed, if I may so express it, for a certain term—say six or twelve months—and receive a course of theoretical and practical instructions in her intended profession; and, if found competent, should be entitled to a certificate of her ability and moral deportment.

“The last-mentioned qualification carries me back to the benevolent Abbé, who justly remarks on this subject: ‘I am sure to displease certain persons; but I am confident I speak the truth, when I assert *that morality can have no fixed basis but in religion*. Beyond this line we discover nothing but the fluctuating interests of the passions. If blindness or despair lead certain persons so far astray as to desire annihilation, or to see nothing but annihilation beyond the grave, the greater part of mankind nevertheless consider it an indubitable fact that this world is

but the entrance to eternity, and that the present life is but a noviciate for one which shall endure without limitation. His future existence is therefore the chief object to a sick man; and when he has attended to the affairs of his soul, the calmness of his mind is a great assistance in seconding the efficacy of medicine.' 'Who, in such a case,' continues the Abbé, 'but would desire to have around him persons imbued with the same principles?'

"M. Gregoire pays a just tribute of applause to several orders or institutions in his own church, for their exemplary attention to the office of visiting and attending the sick. In our own church, and among the various sects in this country, a benefit of the same kind, at least as to visiting, is effected by means of numerous charitable institutions, and particularly the Strangers' Friend Society. M. Gregoire wishes, however, for regular asylums for the sick who can afford to pay for the attentions they require, but have no friend particularly interested in their welfare, and are consequently left a prey to mercenary agents. He would have these infirmaries conducted by women, who should be willing also to attend the sick, if required, at their own homes. 'To women,' he remarks, 'Providence seems to have confided, if not exclusively, at least in an especial manner, the honorable privilege of assuaging sorrow and consoling those who suffer. A woman can far better take care of a sick person, than a man of equal experience, intelligence, and goodwill; for women only,' he adds, 'have that tone of compassion which penetrates the heart, that instinct which divines and anticipates the wants of the sick, and that patience which pliantly bends to all their caprices.'

"The worthy Abbé does not seem to be very sanguine as to the success of his suggestions in his own country; for he remarks that all endeavors have hitherto proved unsuccessful to establish in France a Servants' Friend Society in imitation of those in England, and at Vienna and Hamburgh, in order 'to ameliorate the character of servants, —a class, in France, so numerous and depraved;' and he adds that illiberal criticism and sarcasm on his plan 'will only prove anew, what experience already attests, that no man can attempt to do good with impunity—especially in France.' There is, perhaps, too much truth in this remark as respects every country; but I trust the benevolent Abbé may find also the truth of another maxim,—that a good man usually, in time, lives down opposition: and even should his actions be misunderstood in this world, they will be rightly interpreted at a higher and more impartial tribunal.

"AN INVALID."